

## WITZ

A Journal of Contemporary Poetics

COMMUNITY AND THE  
INDIVIDUAL TALENT

By Charles Bernstein

*[This past January, I started a private e-mail discussion group, Poetics, using the listserve program on one of the University at Buffalo's mainframe computers. The program allows any message sent to "Poetics" to be automatically distributed to all participants. One of the first, and most sustained discussions on "Poetics" was on the subject of poetry communities, particularly in the context of other discussions on the internet of the "virtual" communities possible in "cyberspace." I was slow to join the conversation, so my post on the subject also served as a reply to several specific comments made earlier. For information about "Poetics" you can contact me at [bernstei@ubvms.cc.buffalo.edu](mailto:bernstei@ubvms.cc.buffalo.edu).]*

I had a number of thoughts, over these past weeks of posts, about community, but I've misplaced them.

Every time I hear the words literary community I reach for my bivalent autocad simulation card emulator.

Poetry is (or can be) an aversion of community in pursuit of new constellations of relationship.

In other words, community is as much what I am trying to get away from — reform — as form.

So there are a spectrum of communities, from the closed community modelled on the family, to communities fixed by location (what might otherwise be called, for example, neighborhoods) or civic identification (the community bounding a literal and figurative commons or commonplace) or political ideology, to utopian communities that have either sought to form a new place

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or to remain open by refusing to be grounded by a place.

Literary communities have often been understood in terms of place — the “local” — as Michael Davidson writes about the emergence of a literary community on the West Coast in his book on the SF Renaissance, or in terms of scene (a local hub within a place) or group. Black Mountain remains crucial because it forged an arts community from writers and artists from many places. Most recently, the connections of writers within ethnic, gender, or racial groups have been designated as communities. Schools or movements have not usually been called communities, although Ron Silliman, among others, has wanted to insist that a shared aesthetic project among writers in different locations can best be understood on this model of community. It’s possible to speak of the “poetry community” in the sense of “the poetry world” (in the sense of “the art world”) — but such a formulation immediately suggests that arts funding agencies are nearby (more commonly, one speaks of the “small press community”). I would say “poetry communities” but this begs the questions even as it suggests relief. Many poets that I know experience poetry communities, say scenes, as places of their initial exclusion from publication, readings, recognition. Being inside, a part of, is often far less striking than being left out, apart.

Communities, defined by what they have in common — a place, an ideal, a practice, a heritage, a tradition — cannot immunize themselves against what they do not find common. To have a community is to make an imaginary inscription against what is outside the community. & outside is where some poetry will want to be. That is, some poetry will want to work against received ideas of place, group, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, person, member, individuality, tradition, aesthetic tendency. One does not use collective nouns, or at least not without skepticism (if not anxiety).

Robert von Hallberg, in *Culture & Value*, argues for a poetry that reflects community values; this is what he

calls a poetry or accommodation and also, for the U.S. in the 1970s and 80s, a suburban poetry.

I suppose it has something to do with how comfortable you feel about the confines of family or nation (fine or confining). As the critic asked the poet who had slipped on the ice and was lying in the middle of the road — “Are you comfortable?” — “I make a good living.”

(I take it Steve Evans’ comment in his introduction to the “Technique” in *o.blek/Writing from the New Coast* about his generational “hatred of identity” could also apply to a hatred of community, and perhaps that is implicit in his recent discussion of “hating society properly” and also “hating” tradition. Would this include a hatred of virtual, or for that matter unavowable, communities? Echoing W.C. Fields’ famous repost to being corrected about his insistence that Jews were running the Studio —

Catholics, worst kind of Jews—might we say: Virtual communities, worst kind of communities!?)

Any discussion of community would do well to start with the idea of institution rather than association. For the rules of our associations, one on one or one with

many, is fundamentally an institutional matter (in the sense that Erving Goffman details in his many works). So that I would say the first fact about the “community” made possible through modems hooked up to mainframes that are teleconnected is that the access and protocols of this community are predetermined by the institutions that give us entry into them; for most of us on this particular list “membership” in the university “community” — (and for the few on commercial services bearing the insignia of “.com” at the end of their e-mail addresses, they have simply paid to have access to this already formed nexus.)

This is changing, but that only makes more crucial the need to acknowledge the overlay of different institutional interests that mediate our interactions in these

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### Many poets that I know experience poetry communities, say scenes, as places of their initial exclusion from publication, readings, recognition.

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spaces. We don't shed old institutional habits as we inhabit new institutional spaces so much as project our old ways onto the new spaces. A great deal of sociological analysis is sure to follow us here. But it is interesting to consider what patterns of "who speaks?" in "live" group settings — meetings, seminars — are also present in listserv situations, which may at first appear to be free of the need to interrupt or speak up or find a temporary opening in the discussion.

For example, I will soon begin monitoring how long each of you spends online with Poetics@UBVM or whether and what you download. —The potential for monitoring such transactions, as well as doing various forms of statistical analysis of posts and activity, is part of the medium of our communing here. Several subscribers have noted that one of us has chosen to conceal his identity from the publicly available list of subscribers; am I right to "out" Chris Funkhauser of our SUNY-Albany node?

I have set up this listserv so that anyone can subscribe and I am automatically notified, but also so that the list itself is not listed in any directories of listserves. At some point, to keep the list at a scale small enough, or "common" enough, to work, will it be worth considering eliminating open subscriptions?

The idea of possibly hidden listeners is something a listserv invokes insofar as the communication is considered interpersonal, private in the way a letter is, or even a seminar or meeting; although we accept that we never know who buys our books (or checks them from the library). But perhaps the situation here is more like a performance, where we make our recits individually to an audience that is able to see one another, even if, when on stage, our view of the audience may be blocked by the kleiglits.

That, anyway, would bring to mind Rousseau's preference for public meetings over and against public spectacles (theater): the public convenes to consider its circumstance, its common needs.

What is public space and why does there seem so little of it, as if the public had become a commodity no longer in much demand, but still available for import at high prices, free trade notwithstanding? (We import it from ourselves and the tariffs are high.) So little public space, that is, so much public spectacle.

This suggests the civic values of spaces like these: not reinforcing existing communities but taking up the constitution of social space.

If I resist the idea of a literary community, while working to support the "actually existing" communities of poets among which I find myself, it is because I want to imagine reading and writing, performing and listening, as sites of conversation as much as collectivity. I want to imagine a constellation of readers who write, to and for one another, with the links always open at the end, spiralling outward — centrifugally — not closing in.


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## **We don't shed old institutional habits as we inhabit new institutional spaces so much as project our old ways onto the new spaces.**

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At one point in these parts, posts — a message identified as from Lolpoet (Loss Glazier), echoed G.E. Moore's shaking of fists at the skeptics ("at least I know two things that are real!"): "We are physical beings, not virtual ones." My heart sank, for it is our virtuality that allows for hope. V139HLA3 (at Buf-

falo it is an institutional privilege to have your name be used as part of your user ID), aka Martin Spinelli, wanting to put off the idea that this space of exchange is unreal, insisted, "We are *\*really\** here with our *\*real\** eyes at *\*real\** monitors" (but unfortunately no real italics): yet, my real eyes do me no good if I aspire to something else than what I see, and what I want to monitor is neither real or unreal.

So my hope for electronic communication is not that it engenders virtual communities, but rather virtual uncommunities. 

# ON SUBJECTIVITY

By Daniel Barbiero

In many of the programmatic statements of language-centered poetics, there is at best an uneasiness regarding the subjective factors that come into play in the field of poetics. Certainly, the more overt manifestations of subjectivity had seemingly been evacuated from language-centered poetic practice from the beginning: the confessional subject matter and the intimate voice frequently found in poetry at the time that language-centered poetics was beginning to coalesce (the mid-1970s), did not turn up in "language" poems. On the contrary: the play of the signifier supplanted the persona of the sensitive observer faithfully recording his or her feelings as the ground of literary meaning.

In retrospect, the programmatic anti-subjectivism of language-centered poetics seems largely a consequence of the acceptance of certain assumptions about the function of language and its role in the lives of its users. The most quickly grasped assumption — one that can be gleaned from a reading of the surface features of language-centered poetry — is that language, due to a meaning-occluding opacity, resists its users' attempts to determine the message it will carry in any given situation. This assumption was based in turn on the deeper, ideologically more important assumption that language's opacity derives ultimately from its subservience to the social structures it is supposed to articulate and reproduce through its capacity to transmit ideology. Because it was based on these assumptions, the anti-subjectivism of language-centered poetics was expressed as the thesis that subjectivity is a more or less passive construct of social discourses, through which language acts as a sort of index of the ascendancy of situation over subjectivity.<sup>1</sup> Language-centered poetry, with its emphasis on the signifier, was supposed to illustrate this thesis.

But I believe that language-centered poetics demonstrates not the subordination of subjectivity to situation, but rather the operation of subjectivity through the workings of imagination — through which situation can be transformed. The materiality of language, while it may be a significant factor in the deter-

mination of meaning, does not determine meaning because of something independently intrinsic to language. It must be made to determine meaning. In other words, the phonetic (or arguably, the graphic) aspect of language has to be designated as a locus of meaning if it is to function on a level greater than or equal to the referential aspect. This designation, as I have said, is a function of subjectivity.

Let me briefly state what it is I mean by "subjectivity." By subjectivity I mean the inner correlate of activity, no matter what form that activity may take. It is this aspect that I tried to describe with the notion of the for-itself state, which I used in a recent essay on Barrett Watten: that is, a state that is for the organism's own use in orienting itself in the world. (That definition was perhaps made rigid and a bit restrictive due to a residue of late behaviorism which at the time I found appealing; in effect, I tried to define and describe an inner state without calling it such.) While this definition of subjectivity is fairly schematic, it is so in such a way that it can accommodate the various kinds of inner states we may have, ranging from a simple reflexive, demonstrative intentionality to those states of focused attention in which we might reflect on our personal histories and what we would recognize as the overall patterns of our various dispositions.

Given the recent history of what can be called, correctly or not, anti-Cartesian thinking on the topic (e.g., poststructuralism, Lacanianism, some of the overtly collective forms of identity politics, etc.), subjectivity is a troubled and troublesome notion. Across cases, the term "the subject" presupposes a number of different levels of analysis, and may state or imply one (or more) of a number of things. There is, for example, an understanding of "the subject" that appears to equate it with one's sense of self-identity as enduring or evolving over time: the "self," in other words; at other times, it seems to mean nothing but consciousness, usually based at least implicitly on a model of mental representation derived from a visual model (e.g., the cogito, paraphrased as "I represent myself (to myself)"); and at yet other times, it seems to mean something like a sense of autonomy, usually exaggerated, in which we are supposed to be convinced of our ability to will what we will. In the context of language-centered poetics, I believe it is this latter meaning is usually what is intended.

All I am trying to get at with the notion of subjectivity is that there are internal states, individu-



ated by a content that is not necessarily linguistic, on the basis of which we can, among other things, recognize and exploit regularities in the environment. Language use, and the conventions governing it across different contexts, are among these regularities. Thus while I would agree with Searle that meanings are most likely "in the head," it is also true that those meanings get there as the result of an internalization (literally, by way of the selective strengthening of neural associations), of much that is "out there." For the environment consists as much of cultural phenomena — such as, for instance, acceptable models of poems — as of anything else, and if it is presumably for its adaptive functions that consciousness has been selected, then it must adapt and respond to cultural cues and examples.


In fact, subjectivity is inseparable from intentionality. By this latter term I simply mean something like "understanding," which in a language context can be contrasted with "objective" conceptual content. In this sense, intentionality stands for the way a word (or other language element) is for the user, that is, the aspect or aspects under which the user grasps its meaning. Intentionality is subjective to the extent that the language user's understanding of the aspect by which the language unit presents its referent is dependent on the cognitive plasticity arising from his or her experiences and encounters, as expressed in the repertoire of concepts he or she can bring to bear in any given cognitive situation. One word rather than its synonym may activate a pertinent nuance or association of understanding; it may, in other words, serve to present its referent under an aspect that differs to whatever extent from the aspect with which the synonym might present the same referent. This phenomenon, which is a subjective one, usually goes under the name of opaque referentiality.

The capacity of the signifier to function as a locus of meaning may be attributed to an analogous phenomenon that can be characterized as opaque materiality. In contrast to opaque referentiality, which operates through the conceptual schema, opaque materiality can be seen to operate through the signifier — through sound rather than sense. This is an imaginative operation; by imagination, I mean the mental faculty by which an associative transformation of the given can be effected. If the given in poetry is language as a signifier bearing a signified, then it is through subjective associations that the signifier is transformed

into an active constituent of meaning. The materiality (and embedded accrued meanings, for that matter) to which language-centered poetics ascribes predominance is simply an inert factor that is activated by the (imaginative) intentions of both producer and receiver. That is to say that it is made operative by the subjectivities of producer and receiver.

I do want to make it clear that I believe that the subjective activities relevant to poetics are constrained. They must operate within boundary conditions arising from the practical, enabling constraints appropriate to the type of language use in question, whether those constraints are a matter of the conventions of a genre, the demands of expository clarity, or whatever. For while I believe the subjective dimension is important, it is the context of language use that — to stay with the case of language-centered poetry — provides on the one side the license to give material factors a place of prominence in the production of the message, and on the other the cue to take into account material as well as strictly referential or informational factors in the interpretive reception of the message. Producer and receiver must in effect enter into a kind of contract: the user must intend that the message be understood in terms of its sounds as well as its referential content, while the receiver must agree to pay at least as much attention to how the message is said as to what it says.

I do not wish to imbalance poetics by contriving to shift its center of gravity toward a hypothetical (and, I believe, untenable) subjectivity free from significant determination. I simply wish to restore half of an equation — the half that consists in the inner correlate of outward forms, as administered through the intentionality of understanding. It does not matter whether this latter is expressed in the producer's intention or in the receiver's response; for in either case it is through cognitive and imaginative acts of recognition and association embedded in subjective states that the signifier — and indeed, the signified as well — can be transformed from the inert husk of dead example into the active constituent of actual meaning.

<sup>1</sup> Statements of the ascendancy of situation over subjectivity are plentiful in the literature of language-centered poetics. See, for instance, the Charles Bernstein issue of *The Difficulties* (Vol. 2 #1, 1982); *boundary 2* #9; and the remarks of P. Inman and Bruce Andrews in *The Politics of Poetic Form*. 

# READINGS & REVIEWS

## The Politics of Political Poetry

KLAONICA: POEMS FOR BOSNIA, ED. KEN SMITH & JUDI BENSON (BLOODAXE BOOKS, 1993)

Reviewed By Dan Featherston

What is a "political" poem? What is its use? What do we expect from political poetry? How do we respond with language to global atrocities siphoned through mass media? Is political poetry simply more "mediated" (mis) information? Is language about war possible?

*Klaonica* (Serbo-Croat for *slaughterhouse, butchery, shambles*) is a collection of poems from Britain, Ireland, United States, Europe and Bosnia in response to the war in former-Yugoslavia. This is a book for Bosnia: a variety of perspectives loosely grouped into issues of the war such as rape, refugees, cultural tensions, contrasts of pre-war and contemporary Bosnia, and the separation-continuum of writing from *outside* the war-zone.

The weaknesses of *Klaonica* are not so much related to general questions concerning the usefulness of political poetry. It is not whether "...we'll all agree / on the futility / of poetry," but that *any* poetry requires a use of language as powerful and complex as the issues it confronts. These poems often gloss over the medium itself, as if how language is used is not as integral to meaning as is the issue (war) that draws these pieces together.

For instance, in "Recipe for Saving the World", Katja Wessels (tr. Margitt Lehtert) turns the Bosnian War into a tossed fruit salad:

*The EC Ministers will agree for the first time:  
Watermelons as ammunition for Croat tanks,*

*grapes and pineapples as weapons  
for Serb besiegers, bananas for snipers.*  
(p.33)

Here, poetry plays jester in the world court: witty metaphors (the joke) destabilizing the symbols of power. What this actually does is use language to safely encapsulate the reader in fictive peels of laughter—Wessel's fruit as "un-real" as an AP photo of a Muslim blown to pieces in the streets of Gorazde. The metaphor is supposed to expose the absurdity of war. But these banalities only mask what lies under the artifice: real shrapnel. Rather than bringing Bosnia into closer association via metaphor's disassociation (Rimbaud's "ordered disordering of the senses"), tanks, weapons and snipers are diffused-(de-fused) without adding anything meaningful.

The use of metaphor as placement/displacement in political poetry turns on an ontological basis: poems *for* vs. poems *from*. It is the preposition (*pre-position*) that determines the poem's proximity and relationship to the writer, reader, and what is being "signified." And whether it's the appropriation of the other's voice (e.g., John Hartley Williams' "John Bosnia", in which "Bosnia speaks through "John" so as to conceal the writer's presence), or a Londoner imagining him/herself in the streets of Sarajevo, the *pre-position* is decisive. Some examples of poems that stay, as it were, with Bosnia are Don Paterson's "The Scale of Intensity" and Holger Teschke's "The Minutes of Hasiba".

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## Defacing Bodies

WALK BY COLE SWENSEN (LEAVE BOOKS, 1994)

Reviewed By Chris Stroffolino

In Cole Swensen's latest chapbook, *Walk* (Leave Books, 1994), the distinction between faces and bodies (rather than 'mind' and 'body') occupies a privileged position. As early as Section 2 of this 10 section poem, the speaker can be "seen" siding with bodies against faces, and thus siding with the third person against the second. If there seems something "counterintuitive" about this it's perhaps because we've accepted too uncritically such 'commonsense' theories as Buber's "I and Thou" and employ them to flagellate ourselves for such 'lapses' Swensen is more willing to acknowledge (and even provisionally embrace). Though Swensen implicitly critiques such a stance (of siding with bodies against faces) by framing it in the past tense, by admitting "I am/uncomfortable with faces, they/ make me cry" and by expressing without passing smug judgment on the desire to live "alone in the world" and to "read all night long" Swensen radically questions the cult of 'intimacy' that privileges a face-to-face model at the expense of all others.

Not content with a simple dualism, Swensen enacts a 'definition' of bodies as not static but walking. They resemble both "iridescent animals/ too small to be seen with the naked eye/ that live in the lungs and read all night long" as well as writing itself. Nor are the faces static; they are simply only present as an absence:

*Constellations with pages of  
open light just where the faces should be.  
This can only happen in the dark. (III)*

This is less of an act of depersonalization than it is of



defamiliarization (like Elaine DeKooning's portrait of Frank O'Hara than Beckett's "faceless world incurious"). For though we could read a certain bleakness to her sense of a faceless world in such stanzas as:

*The bridges are suspended as if a person  
walking  
has no anchor in any world  
and the foot lands after the foot  
like a victim of amnesia in his brand new  
life.  
The sound belongs to no one, there  
are no mouths here, just round Os that  
mutter  
zero, zero, zero. (IV)*

there is also an exhilarating difficulty in such surface tension in which there's no need for anchors because "the entire body / is braille and there/ is nothing inside." (At this point, I might not be entirely unjust to refer to the first line of another recent Swensen poem not included in *Walk*: "To love is to remove the face"—at least the kind of face that denies the primacy of bodies, though Swensen is not just reacting or working dialectically here, despite my schemas.

The theme of blindness itself is also central to *Walk*. What is addressed here is not so much a fear of going blind as much as a fear of being told you're going blind. The first poem addresses this question in terms of ways and means: What should one do in such a situation? And it is a situation. One could either deny one's blind, desperately truck off to the eye-doctor, or embrace the uncertainty of blindness. Swensen chooses the latter. By rehearsing responses to such accusations of blindness, Swensen exposes the social condition of writing/walking. Such social dimensions become more acute in Section 5, the first time the second person pronoun occurs.

When she writes (in Section 5): "One leads down/ to pick up something from the ground I cannot see," the content of "it" as well as the place from where it

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## The Political Economy of Pam Rehm

THE GARMENT IN WHICH NO ONE HAD SLEPT, BY PAM REHM.  
(BURNING DECK, 1993)

Reviewed by Clint Burnham

I first wrote: "The Political Economy of Pam Grier," in reference to the seventies grrrl cop valorized by Quentin Tarantino in film and print. And that's appropriate, I think (although a lot of people really hate mass culture stuff brought into the ambit of poetry), because just as Tarantino and his ilk have brought the 70s back into mass appeal (with myself, included), there has arguably been no more significant event in the last ten years of college poetry than the invention of the Dickinson-Melville tradition.

Nostalgia has many uses, not the least of which is to take a sanitized (albeit "written" & therefore "dirty" in some safe Derridean way) past and use it to substitute for the unmanageable present.

And yet, one must agree with a number of propositions simultaneously, and this is what makes it all a postmodern dilemma. This was demonstrated by a friend of mine who said that he did feel, coming onto the scene in 1988-89, the influence of Bruce Andrews, and that he welcomed the rhetoric of the *apex* of the *M* editorial just because it might open the possibilities a bit (Pam Rehm is one of the editors of the Buffalo-based *apex* magazine.) But I guess I never felt the constraints of the Language set — a sign of being in Canada? — although many of my compatriots, or some of them, a handful of prominent poets here in Toronto, have very negatively reviewed and commented upon and felt paranoid towards the Kootenay School. Yo mimesis!

Thus, as others have pointed out, there is a bit of a disjunction between the *apex* introduction and its contents: I'm thinking of Benjamin Friedlander's work, which certainly bears for its author quite a burden. What I mean here

is that Friedlander's written some of the most important work of this moment. To my mind. And then there's Sean Killian, also killin', but making Benjamin jammin'.

To return to the question of what Rehm means, we can start with asking, what are garments? By that I mean, a "garment in which no one had slept" indicates a bifurcated possibility (or probably a triad, to invoke the necessary reference to Hong Kong action films): an allegory in which language is like un-used clothing, that is, decoration; or a cultural-studies update of Barthesian semiotics, one both materialist and feminist in its take on what garments signify (the third is a less readable one, which is "fuzzed" by the cover photo of Rehm's beautiful *Burning Deck* volume). (As will become evident later in this review, the current vogue with "genre" music — gangsta, deathcore and horrorcore being the logical descendants of the use of Poe-like horror lit by Richard Wright in *Native Son* and *The Outsider* — shows how genre and tradition can be used in remarkably subversive ways. The ghostly photo on the cover of Rehm's book may possess other intentions.)

So: what is the effect of the Clinton policy in Haiti, but to try and make a miserable nation long under the yoke of US imperialism into another CNN mini-series for US power? Commentators have pointed out that Aristide went to the US because he couldn't get support from the Anglo Caribbean, even though the people want intervention.

*The Garment in Which No One Had Slept*: a clause for a title. The book contains nine multi-page poems, in 62 pages. My first impression here is one

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Interview with Myself:

## In Which the Primary Object of Discussion is Susan Smith Nash's New Chapbook

A VEIL IN THE SAND BY SUSAN SMITH NASH (ROOM PRESS, 1994)

Reviewed By W.B. Keckler

I: Self, Orion is hung aloft; the neighborhood is asleep; a cup of pretentious Earl Grey tea (the Queen's favorite) streams between us; I can't help but feel it is the perfect moment to discuss Ms. Nash's latest!

I: I concur, *mon semblable*, *mon frère*!

I: Self, what do you make of this new chap about T.E. Lawrence, the legendary "Lawrence of Arabia?"

I: I find it to be an interesting animal. Quite successfully adapted to its environment. I am speaking, of course, of contemporary letters.

I: What do you know about the legendary "Lawrence of Arabia," Self?

I: Pitifully little, I'm afraid. Shall we consult our little red Viking Desk Encyclopedia? I see you nod "yes": Well, "Adventurer, soldier scholar. n Yes. "Wrote *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, *Revolt in the Desert*. Helped defeat the Turks. Diplomacy. Failed to achieve Arab independence."

I: They don't mention his penchant for flagellation, a la Swinburne?

I: No, but *A Veil in the Sand* does. "(D)o you understand why I pay/ my jr. officer to flog me until I bleed, until / my mind thinks only surface?" (from "On Strata".)

I: There seems to be a good deal of subtext dealing with Alchemy. Was Lawrence, as Rimbaud before him, drawn to the Transmutation of Ele-

ments as a metaphor for spiritual Transmutation in the soul?

I: I'm not sure. It is the sort of thing which makes one curious to read more, non? The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E-derived lyricism seems to echo these transmutations itself, with the way words meld syntax to draw substance to substance: like molecular bonds shifting almost magically. It is a sort of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E alchemy.

I: Yes, I know exactly what you mean. Witness: "caravanserai natural transmutation of metal & flesh/ sublimate solid to vapor like angels & a fallen/ Adam cast forth Paradisaical rhyme farcical,..." (from "Barchan"). How about the artist's counter-genre stance? What do you make of that?

I: I think it's very imaginative and brave.

I: Why for the brilliant coloration of its hybridization! It's the next generation of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry put in the service of serious biography. Check out her extensive bibliography: this poet ain't fooling!

I: Ah, yes. But I thought L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poetry was scriptible, not lisible....."writerly" as opposed to "readerly"...that text must be partially or wholly constructed (with often wildly-varying results) by the reader who is acting *qua* writer.

I: Oh, that's still true! Fear not: we still have our *qua*. But this is definitely a new animal.

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## Dot Lamour

HELEN KELLER OR ARAKAWA BY  
MADELINE GINS (BURNING BOOKS  
AND EAST-WEST CULTURAL  
STUDIES, 1994)

Reviewed By Serge Gavronsky

Unlike / every other book, it moves forward / retreats; holds / releases; absorbs / rejects; is / is not; s/he visible-invisible. it is fundamentally a quest / ion.

But (a logical interruptive conjunction) as book it is held / seen / read, especially seen and read as a play of the vast range of typography as only a 'philosophical inquiry (a quest / ion) can do into the very matter of perception and the thought which accompanies it, faithful Sancho. it is a pleasure (rare these days), a challenge and a victory (an either / or or an "either" by itself).

We-it / Helen Keller (Madeline Gins / Arakawa / words / spaces / voices / scoop of page / scope of...)

Madeline Gins is a fabulist with quotation marks as one second degree of perception technique. Who is she (is "she"? s/he?) who wanders / wonders a / round Arakawa's work as she is her Self a work of Madeline Gins through language in prose, jumping bean of a prose writer / stable-unstabilizing reading (forcing the reader to consider the text as opaque (yet transparent too). It is a mix of routine talk, poetry in prose, poetry on the page, maniacal constructs. She: "line active". Or again "I tud so".

Make of Madeline Gins what s/he makes her Self (her): playful, thoughtful, arbitrary, arrows suspended in mid-air going where arrows go, yet unpredictable in their trajectories (on the canvas / page). The text is motion / space, everything her(e) imagination and story-telling a telling story since it re(situates)-capitulates art (percep-

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# PUBLICATIONS RECEIVED AND NOTED

## Books & Chapbooks

Will Alexander: *Arcane Lavender Morals*. Leave Books, 1994

Edward Barrett: *Common Preludes* (The Groundwater Press) 1994.

Guy R. Beining: *Too Far to Hear*. Leave Books, 1994

Kamau Brathwaite: *Trench Town Rock* (Lost Roads) 1994.

Laynie Brown: *One Constellation* (Leave Books) 1994.

John Byrum: *Text Blocks*. Generator Press (limited edition), 1994

John Byrum: *Meat of Four Percepts*, Generator Press (limited edition), 1994

Wanda Coleman: *American Sonnets* (Light & Dust Books/Woodland Pattern Book Center) 1994.

Sally Doyle: *Under the Neath*. Leave Books, 1994

Terry Ehret, Steven Gilmartin, Susan Herron Sibbet: *Suspensions* (White Dick Mountain Press) 1990.

Edward Foster: *Code of the West: A Memior of Ted Berrigan* (Rodent Press) 1994.

Peter Ganick: *untitled/self-knowledge* (Tight Press) 1994.

Susan Gevirtz *Prothesis : : Caesarea* (Potes and Poets) 1994.

Peter Gizzi: *Hours of the Book* (Zasterle Press) 1994.

Bob Grumman: *Mathemaku 6-12* (tel let Press) 1994.

Bob Heman: *15 Structures* (Incurve Press) 1986.

Dick Higgins: *Buster Keaton Enters Into Paradise*. Left Hand Books, 1994. \$12

Emmanuel Hocquard: *Theory of Tables* (translated by Michael Palmer) o•blek Editions 1994

Lori Lubseki: *Stamina* (Leave Books) 1994.

Kimberly Lyons: *Rhyme the Lake*. Leave Books, 1994

Kevin Magee: *Tedium Drum*, Part II. Leave Books, 1994

Lissa McLaughlin: *The Body's Executioner* (tel let) 1994

Susan Smith Nash: *T.E. Lawrence: A Veil in the Sand* (Room Press) 1994.

Kristin Prevallet: *from Perturbation, My Sister* (Leave Books) 1994.

Joan Retallack: *Icarus Falling*. Leave Books, 1994

Rillo: *Wolf's Clothing*. Left Hand Books, 1994. \$9

Eléna Rivera: *Wale; or, The Corse*. Leave Books, 1994

Joe Ross: *Push* (Leave Books) 1994.

Cole Swensen: *Walk* (Leave Books) 1994.

Keith Waldrop: *Light While There is Light, An Americsn History* (Sun & Moon) 1993.

## Journals

ACM #27. Barry Silesky and Sharon Solwitz, Eds. \$8.00. 3709 N. Kenmore, Chicago, IL 60613.

Chain#1. Jena Osman & Juliana Spahr Eds. Single issue \$7.95; \$14 for two. Make checks payable to UB Foundation, 107 14th St. Buffalo, NY 14213.

*Die Young* #7. \$9, three issues. English Dept. P.O. box Drawer 44691, University of Southwestern Louisiana, Lafayette, LA 70504.

*The Experiodicist*. Jake Berry, Ed. (No price given). P.O. Box 3112, Florence, AL 35630. Seven poems by Sheila E. Murphy.

*First Intensity* #3. \$9; subscription \$17 per year. Lee Chapman, Ed. P.O. Box 14073, Staten Island, NY 10314-0713.

*Generator 6: Dissembling / Dismantling*, edited by John Byrum, 8139 Midland Road, Mentor, OH 44060

*Heaven Bone* #11. Steven Hirsch, Ed. \$6.00. P.O. Box 486, Chester, NY 10918.

*House Organ* #8. No Price Given. Kenneth Warren, ed. 1250 Belle Ave. Lakewood, OH 44107

*Juxta* #1. Jim Leftwich & Ken Harris, Eds. Single issue \$4.50; subscription: \$9 per year. 977 Seminole Trail #331, Charlottesville, VA 22901.

*Lingo* #3; \$12.50, two issues. Michael Gizzi and Jonathan Gams, eds. P.O. Box 184, West Stockbridge, MA 01266.

*Poetic Briefs* #17. \$10 for 6 issues. Jeff Hansen and Elizabeth Burns, eds. 31 Parkwood #3, Albany, NY 12208

*Poetry Project Newsletter*, vol. 154 (Oct./Nov.). Free four times a year to members of the Poetry Project, St. Marks Church-in-the-Bowery, 131

## Political Poetry

(continued from page 6)

Also notable is Ken Smith's "Essential Serbo-Croat": a list of Serbo-Croat sentences opposite their English translations, forming two columns, or zones, divided by a significant space. The lists are comprised of sentences a UN doctor might find useful, thumbing through a Serbo-Croat/English dictionary:

Boli  
Boli me  
Boli me ovdje  
Boli me grudi

It hurts  
I have a pain  
I have a pain here  
I have a pain in my breast  
(p.52)

A kind of satire on the tourist's "Essential Serbo-Croat", the poem moves from simple description (simple sentences) to increased specificity of location, degree and duration of pain, drawing the reader closer to details of the "foreign language"/"foreign body", while at the same time maintaining a separation: patient/doctor; Bosnian/world-spectator; speaker/translator. The poem implies a deeper correlation between the acts of translating and sympathizing: that all responses are translations, questioning the writer's ability to "treat" a situation outside his/her own linguistic and ontologic realms.

In her introduction to *Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness*, Carolyn Forché states that "in the oral testimony of survivors of the Shoah, their accounts fragment as they approach the core of the trauma. The narrative of the trauma is itself traumatized..." Forché's comment on survivor narratives may also imply something about spectator-narratives. The literal distance that most of the poets in *Klaonica* are writing from (over 75% of the writings come from the U.K.) may account for the disengaged feel of the poems, and the desire to create an arti-

fice of closure through pathetic fallacy, controlled syntax and linear narrative. This is not to say that meaningful poetry cannot exist without parataxis. Nor is this to say that meaningful poetry cannot exist without having directly experienced the trauma of war. But it does raise the question of how the use of language and the imaginative process are impacted by experience. The formal styles found in *Klaonica* may not only indicate cultural variances, but the schizophrenic impact media has on human psychology whereby the world is at once more "visible" and more "abstract" (invisible).

*Klaonica* is significant in that it works from a belief that poetry has a moral imperative to witness and testify against social and political injustices (something that the majority of both formalist and innovative U.S. poets seem to have forgotten or disregarded since Vietnam). This is a book for Bosnia from the outside, looking in through newspapers and tv. screens. Despite its shortcomings, *Klaonica* implies that the mass media are not merely something to passively absorb (or deflect), but work into/against in response to what's happening in and around us.

Ultimately, all *klaonics* are human *klaonics*—the global (slaughter) house where we live; and that's everybody's business, including poets. ♫

\*proceeds from *Klaonica* go to Feed the Children and other funds for Bosnia

## Cole Swensen

(continued from page 7)

came are cut off so as to foreground the picking up itself by framing it with the blindness of *selective perception*. Such selective, if not necessarily truncated, perception, allows her to envision something "unaffected by inversion" which modulates into "The single sentence in which/ no order above all others," in short, an IDEAL sentence that may not be able to exist in a single reading. Perhaps it is against such ideality that Swensen opposes the "you," though at first the 'you' is evoked as a kind of ideal:

Your silence  
is all that doesn't scare  
me, all that makes of breath a sphere,  
a pierce in arching space, a chime. (V)

Yet this remains consistent with the urge to bypass-faces, insofar as the 'you' with which the speaker sets herself in relation resembles the spine of an iridescent animal. In the final stanza:

The spine of an iridescent animal  
is always a circle. So like me it has no face  
and the moving parts take part in some  
movement, traceless, that the body  
replaces with words (V).

Though one could see the kinship here with Derrida's attack on the phallogocentrism of a speech over writing model, one doesn't have to read Swensen as "bypassing" faces—for the center "faces" occupy is as culturally inscribed as the "fact" that what opposes it must be a kind of crippling blindness. In addition, Swensen evokes a kind of faith in the automatic pilot (if not 'invisible hand') of the chthonic next poem (in which the "sphere" and the "you" are elaborated):

When you went blind I could no longer  
see you. The curvature  
of the earth will make  
these lines run together,  
ships sailing parallel disappear in a single  
point

so you could be with me always (VI)

There's the sense that eyes and faces separate us and must be subverted so we can walk together. But walking, a metaphor for writing throughout, reminds us that this alliance between "bodies" and "words" against the common enemy of "faces" is at best uneasy. For words may be only claiming a relationship to the body to ground their opposition with faces in something other than escapism. Swensen seems to sense this when she turns to the "something...the blind can move in silence/ far beyond their bodies." But rather than rejecting words, Swensen rejects the body as ground (just as she



rejected the face as ground earlier). In fact, what Zukofsky would call "the whole face of the ground", the dream of ground itself, is eschewed here for the silent second person other/double of "some dearer measure/ that the foot can't bare.(VI)"

In contrast to the careful, almost technical, voice of VI, with its four dimensional tropes on "measure" and "foot," section VII employs more seemingly "conversational" run-ons to dramatize THE BODY as that which is nostalgic for the gaudy money-shot burst of alleged authenticity as disruptive force; she opposes this to the blind who read by touch (braille), but no longer towards the ends of stripping sight of its status. By section VIII, on the plot level of the book at least, the eyes, once linked with the face, also turn against it. They, too, through tropes and substitution, abandon the sinking ship of the face thus rendering the face more powerless or meaningless as a model:

*Ships without faces, just eyes  
to stand for the curvature of the earth,  
to hold its place, like a zero  
waits and so develops its own life. (VIII)*

In a dramatic move, the eyes here join the body, silence, blindness, the zero, the curvature of the earth, the other/double. Yet Swensen wonders if this proliferation of meaning, this walking, has gone too far. Indeed, the need for a new limit, or a return, can be seen when she writes:

*We see  
the backs of words in single file  
while their eyes press beyond. (VIII)*

There is a coming to terms with counting, with choosing, with "a world that can't be seen from the distance." At last, then, in section IX, for the first time in the book, there is a present face. One could say the circle completes itself, but it is no short circuit for the faces are "felt" not seen:

*I feel a face alight and we'll  
both be blind and sound  
will multiply on its axis,*

*gain momentum and cry. (IX)*

To conclude then, one could characterize Walk as a coming to terms with one's inevitable blindspots, a working through of one's fear of faces and the crying they "signify." Or one can conclude that the face-body dualism (not "mind"—in fact, the word "mind" never appears in Walk) is only resolved by foregrounding a more subtle "sight-touch" dualism. This "sight-touch" distinction however is not a dualism *per se* because it doesn't rely on abstract structures (as face and body do) but on actions, gestures. When she writes:

*The walking can be argued  
as pure action. That which  
sets the cell walls trembling  
and dissolves. Numbers  
never did anyone any good  
without uncountable zeros. (IX)*

she is not denying the possibility that there is no such thing as pure action. She may be more interested in going beyond (or without) argument. For "pure action" must allow the possibility of inert manipulable objects, and thus cannot be pure, though this can be argued. Swensen's evocative mappings leave room for such arguments, but by coming to the realization that that which can be argued as pure action is the everything that breathes only when one feels alone in the world. This world (or view of the world) is hermetically sealed and thus without distinction and must be put in the past (tense) in the end. *✍*

## Pam Rehm

(continued from page 7)

of unrequited minimalism. "Base Material" is 5 pages of three or four lines a page: here, an asterisk has the effect of a building blowing up in a Schwarzenegger film. It is noticed. The poem of about 45 words stretches white space like recent *Village Voice* covers (& I have horror vacua so you can see I'm at a disadvantage). The first page goes, for instance,

*tiny I*

*thin*

*hang*

*in hint night\**

### \*Anything I

Now, the page is immediately brilliant, and this is what I mean about the postmodernism of the whole effect: we have a theory of anti-Language extremism coupled with a poetry quite different.

"We feel that perhaps Modernism and probably post-Modernism [the orthography here, small "p", hyphen, large "M" indicate already a certain bias — but then again, my lettrism here may be dismissed as so much pomo foolery] will be seen as having been but footnotes between, if not two phases of Romanticism — the Platonic and the eschatological, then between Romanticism and the poetries of the coming millennium, and we hope that, following Dickinson, Melville, Stevens, and others, a new understanding of our task as iconoclasts and not innovators will emerge" (apex of the M 1, p. 7.)

First of all, the main purpose of the current fetishization of the American canon is to ensure that the formal and political tendencies of Language-influenced writing do not result in an "Anti-American" discarding of the canon. Unlike a fascination with Zukofsky a generation ago, the Melville-Dickinson dyad affirms a white, Anglo based poetics, and one which ensures that the current generation of poets does not result in the devaluation of the multi-million dollar library holdings of ivy league and sub-ivy league colleges and universities. In the same way deconstruction resulted in maintaining both the ivy league (Yale school, anyone?) and its presses (Chicago) by accommodating Californian and midwest schools and presses (Minneapolis anyone?).

The editorial in general is trenchantly critical of "language"-associated excess (reminding me of a local poet who dismissed Atom Egoyan's films as Euro-anxiety video based on seeing clips of two of them) — and yet what do I think of when I see this first set of poems by Rehm, indeed, this first page, but Steve McCaffery's *Knowledge Never Knew* (1983)? Like that book, Rehm's opening pages pose the question of space, of the space between the initial stanza and the bottom line, "referenced" by the asterisk. A "tiny I" for sure, which can also be an "Anything I" thanks to palindrome-like manipulations. But if the poem seems formally rooted (radicalized?) in McCaffery, it goes in other directions. Indeed, and without wanting to set up a straw figure of comparison, it's about as "radical" in that way as the use of the pun is in "Melville's Marginalia."

Now, I purchased my copy of Susan Howe's *The Non-Conformist's Memorial* at The World's Biggest Bookstore here in Toronto, a very large downtown store owned by the chain Cole's (viz Norma) — which might quell the "fierce" debates on the buff poetics electronic conference over poetry in bookstores, it's been very religious & histrionic (which is not the same thing as hysterical, which I welcome); I might add that I took Maggie O'Sullivan to The World's Biggest when she was in town, & she bought six volumes of bpNichol's *The Martyrology*.


Punning in *The Martyrology* is one thing (or in Nancy Shaw's *Scopocratic*, one of my favourite books of the last ten years); it serves or does duty in the "avant-garde's poetics of 'language itself,' with its forcefield-like purgation of radical alterity and non-linguistic, material influx and receptivity" that apex of the M declaims (p. 7). Actually, I don't really understand what I just quoted from apex; it seems to say ... well, fuck it. So I'm saying that the pun is different in Howe: just what does it matter that the forgotten cultural nationalist James Clarence Mangan is close to the word "margin," anyway (Howe, 105)? On the other hand, I

think it's cool that Mangan may have been a dope fiend. Acid marxism from this day on.

In a way, Rehm's work ends up being akin to Wu-Tang Clan or Gravediggaz, East Coast rappers trying to challenge the hegemony of the West Coast flavour. And as the Gravediggaz, by having their album advertised as "horrorcore," were able to then dispute the label as one invented by their, uh, label, so we can see the incommensurability of the "poetics" and the "poetry" chez Rehm. In the end, that is, the totally cool "Thus I Find my Legs" & "Repudiation" stand out for me. "Repudiation" has the necessary inclusion of the marginal in a way that seems more Grim or Neilson and less Howe: i.e. the end of the first page goes:

... I am free to  
reject the objects of mathematics.  
However, explain the closer bond.  
Testing. 1.2.3.4.

The brilliance of the last line is severely at odds with the "humanism" of the mathematical rejection (sorry for the humanism bashing, tho). 1.2.3.4. is unreadable and shifting (the next four pages are numbered so) in the way that I can sometimes see people reading Dickinson, but you can read so many writers that way, from Bliss Carman (Pound's favourite writer in the 1910's) to Chris Stroffolino, so why stop at ED and HM? Or: HMV, and remember Moby, great-grandson of the novelist, now a rave and ambient musicker.

Irreligious ecstasy. In the same way here in Canada a generation of writers are busy feeding off the corpse of bpNichol — retrofitted with more Derrida and Cixous. Canonization has too much balls for my taste. The wrong kind of balls, anyway. 

**Nash** (continued from page 8)

I: So, this new poetry is not as blood-thirsty as its predecessors, not as intent on assassinating the Subject?

I: Not necessarily true, Self. Be careful you do not entrench behind an au-

thorial fallacy. Poets today reserve the right to enter any and all previous poetic modalities. And to cross-breed them at will. That's Postmodernism 101. And Ms. Nash is a versatile author, so let's not reach for the butterfly pins the way critics always rush to do.

I: Poets today are different?

I: Many are. Ms. Nash is a perfect example. A schizoid culture must, of necessity, produce artists doubly gifted at collapsing (often violent) elements into a stable compound. Sodium and chlorine yield salt. What do lyricism and total Human skepticism yield? What about poetry and materialism? Such are the concerns and such is the process of the most interesting poets writing today.

I: Ah, Self...I believe we are running out of time. We are, after all, merely ad hoc creations of a manipulative being. Not even a Socratic dialogue, really. For we are so evenly matched

I: Never mind. Any last comments on *A Veil*?

I: Yes. The chap reads as wonderful biography: the author might consider presenting it as theater someday, somewhere.

I: What a wonderful observation, Self! But now we must go. I am quite hungry, as is my wont.

I: Myself too, oddly enough. Two Characters in Search of a Sandwich?

I: Indeed! 

**Gins** (continued from page 8)


tion), philosophy (love of ...) the texture in its flagrant presence (could it have been a paradigmatic shift and made to read, in this case Fragrance?)

If this were not enuf then whatt?

There's physics, and Japan—you got it! There's cosmos / universe / film and pro-



cessing of thought. Take two for instance. Get the Gins drift of things. in the margins of the text, there's Arakawa's title. Yes, yet another marginal, sotto voce language with dates, just to make us happy, reassured that in this time of geography there's a rime with Chamonix. A blank stare. There's even food here and what I think of as haiku. "Here." Fundamentally Madeline Gins is / not a trans /lator of Arakawa's. Furthermore suppose linearity were fiction where "dots are more concrete than words." Then language is a dot syntax. Dot Lamour.

I predict you'll love "it"; it's got everything especially a strategy, a sort of Nietzschean joy, dancer in the air of words. Remember, when you turn the book around you've got to look hard at the black dot on the back cover on a white field with a black stratosphere below. 

## Publications

(continued from page 8)

- E. 10th St., N.Y., NY 10003.  
*The Prose Poem: An International Journal* Vol. #3. \$8; Peter Johnson, ed. (manuscripts only considered between Jan. 1 and April 1, 1995).  
*River City* Vol 14. #2. "The Experimental Writing Issue." Paul Naylor, Ed. \$5; subscription 2 issues \$9. Dept. of English, Memphis State University, Memphis State U. 38152. No unsolicited mss. until August 1996.  
*That #21: Bruce Andrews and Ray Di Palma. That #22: Clayton Eshleman & Halliday Dresser That #23: Stephen Jonas "4 Letters."* P.O. Box 85 Peacham, VT 05682.  
*Tight* Vol. 3#5. \$4.50. Ann Erickson, ed. P.O. Box 1591, Guerneville, CA 95466. *Tight* Vol 4, #5.

Witz's "Books and Magazines Received" section has been expanded to include as many as possible of the works of innovative writing published during the previous four months, including magazines, chapbooks, broadsides, pamphlets, etc. There is no need to send an entire publication, unless you are submitting it for a review. Instead, publishers may supply a certain amount of information (specified below). The book or magazine (or whatever) will be listed in the newly renamed "Publications Received and Noted" section. The information needed is: (for books) title, author, publisher's name, city of publication, price, number of pages, ISBN. Journals should provide title, editor's name, price, city of publication, volume and number, ISSN, and the contents. N.B.: you might want to send a xerox of the title page and copyright page and possibly the contents page. You may also provide a brief (30 words or so) description of the publication, which will be included if space permits.

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